BUILDING A STRONGER CANADA

Taking Action on Western Discontent

A West in Canada Project Update

February 2004

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CanadaWest FOUNDATION

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In September 2003, the Canada West Foundation published ***The West in Canada: An Action Plan to Address Western Discontent***. The document reflected a deep-seated belief among western Canadians that when it comes to their interests and aspirations, the Government of Canada doesn't listen, doesn't understand, and doesn't care. As a consequence, the relationship between the West and the federal government is marked by suspicion and acrimony, and by national policies that often fail to account for the unique characteristics of western Canada. In short, it is a relationship that needs to be fixed.

The West in Canada had three primary objectives:

- to illustrate the seriousness of regional discontent in western Canada;
- to lay out a realistic action plan for dealing with the causes of western discontent; and
- to serve as a catalyst for informed public debate on the place of the West in the Canadian federation.

As the next national election approaches, it is now more important than ever to articulate how the West's voice can be strengthened within the federation to the benefit of all Canadians. **To find out how you can support this important initiative, please contact our Fund Development Officer Lison McCullough by email (mccullough@cwf.ca) or by phone (403.264.9535).**

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As the country prepares for the national election that is expected this spring, it is useful to revisit the Canada West Foundation's recent call to fix the problems inherent in the structure and operation of the federal government that are responsible for western Canadian discontent. There has been a good deal of discussion about western discontent since the release of *The West in Canada: An Action Plan to Reduce Western Discontent* in September 2003. Unfortunately, this discussion has not yet been matched with a lot of *action*. As witnessed in the February 2, 2004 Throne Speech, Prime Minister Paul Martin has not set out a concrete plan for addressing the causes of western discontent, the new Conservative Party of Canada has been preoccupied with merger and leadership issues, and the New Democratic Party has been silent on how best to address western discontent.

There is a deep-seated belief among western Canadians that when it comes to their interests and aspirations, the Government of Canada doesn't listen, doesn't understand, and doesn't care.

The momentum generated by the release of the Canada West Foundation action plan risks being lost as other issues fight for attention, as promises are forgotten or abandoned, and as bold words are replaced by half-measures. Continuing to postpone fundamental change will further undermine the effectiveness of the federal government and the health of democracy in Canada. It is time, therefore, to restate the critical importance of addressing the causes of western discontent. Addressing the problems that lead to western discontent should be a key election issue and a major part of the platform of all parties committed to a better Canada. It is time for the current government to "walk the talk." For the opposition parties, it is time to make this issue a top priority and to be as clear as possible about how they plan to fix the problems that breed western discontent.

Given this, the Canada West Foundation believes that it is an appropriate time to take stock of how the debate about western discontent has evolved since the release of the action plan. It is also time to once again highlight the importance of taking practical steps toward changing the way the federation operates and eliminating the causes of western discontent and, in turn, its corrosive effects. *Building a Stronger Canada: Taking Action on Western Discontent* revisits and updates the Canada West Foundation's ten-point action plan, reviews the debate it sparked, and identifies the alternatives that have been discussed since its release.

The Deep Roots of Western Discontent

Western discontent is not the result of dissatisfaction with particular policies or programs alone. The root cause of western discontent is the lack of adequate western Canadian input into national decisions.

For those who live in the West, and for those who have spent time in the region, the reality of discontent and its effects are clear. For westerners, regional discontent is not an abstract theoretical concept measured and discussed by curious political scientists. It is a major factor in how western Canadians interpret national decisions. There is a palpable sense in the region that the federal government either does not understand the West or does not care.

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Western voices in the federal government are muted by an ineffective Senate, excessive party discipline, the first-past-the-post electoral system, and insufficient western input into policy development, application and evaluation within the federal bureaucracy. These structural barriers add up to inadequate western representation within the federal government. This representational shortfall is the root cause of western discontent. Westerners do not just "feel" like outsiders when it comes to the federal government – they *are* outsiders. As a result, western Canadians believe that their country has a number of built-in flaws – flaws that hurt all Canadians, and that need to be repaired.

This disconnect far outstrips the physical distance that divides the country's regions. Whereas the barriers created by physical distance can be – at least in part – overcome by transportation and technology, the psychological divide that exists between the federal government and the West can only be bridged by fundamental changes to the nature of the federation.

The solution to western discontent is not a matter of figuring out how to get westerners to accept their lot in the federation and stop complaining. It is not about "managing" western discontent (the dominant management technique used to date has been to ignore western discontent), but of identifying the root causes and making the appropriate changes to how the federal government works.

Western discontent may be a regional issue, but it is a national problem. It speaks to the very heart of what Canada is all about, and to our common commitment to democracy and good government.

The structure of the federation – in conjunction with longstanding federal practices – blocks western input into the federal policy process. There is some western input, but not enough. This is problematic not only for the West, but for Canada as well. The danger is not western separation, but western *disengagement*. Many westerners are simply tired of trying – tired of an unresponsive federal government afraid of real change – and are looking inward and away from Ottawa. It is not a question anymore of westerners being in or out; it is a question of losing interest in the federal government's role in their lives. This does not bode well for a country whose greatest strength is its diversity and whose greatest weakness is the federal government's chronic failure to fully integrate that diversity.

Seizing the Day

Hence the importance of capitalizing on this time of change in national politics to arrest western disengagement by tackling the causes of western discontent head-on. Paul Martin has replaced Jean Chrétien as leader of the Liberal Party, a campaign is underway to choose the leader of the newly formed Conservative Party of Canada, and fresh life has been injected into the New Democratic Party by its new leader Jack Layton. For the Canada West Foundation – an organization dedicated to introducing western perspectives into national debates – and for westerners who are willing to give it another shot, it is time to try again to get the federal government to not only listen, but to act.

What is required is for *all* national parties and *all* candidates in the next national election to embrace the need to address western discontent and see this issue as one of critical importance to the future of Canada. Western discontent may be a regional issue, but it is a *national* problem. It speaks to the very heart of what Canada is all about, and to our common commitment to democracy and good government.

Prime Minister Martin has, as this report will show, made some promises, but he has not gone much beyond rhetoric at this point and has even moved in the opposite direction on the fundamentally important issue of Senate reform. Despite strong pro-western elements in the new Conservative Party, it is not clear what stance its new leader will take toward western discontent, and the NDP response to this issue has been silence. As a result, it is not clear how much effort the national parties are willing to put into addressing western discontent.

No matter how the election turns out, a key concern of all parties and all Canadians should be the building of a better Canada by addressing the problems that breed western discontent.

Westerners also need to get more engaged and overcome the fatigue, distrust, and frustration that is the legacy of decades of federal inaction. This is where the Canada West Foundation's action plan comes in. It is an attempt to break the stalemate of federal inaction and the slow, steady march of western disengagement. The alternative is a country that will grow even more divided and dysfunctional in the years ahead. We can – and must – do better.

Addressing the causes of western discontent should be a hotly debated election issue. At the same time, it should not be about getting more votes in the West. Increasing the West's role in national decisions should be about making Canadian democracy better and creating a system of policy development that fully accounts for western needs and perspectives rather than charming voters. It is about doing what is right for the West and what is right for Canada. Western voters – indeed all voters – need to know where the various parties and candidates stand on this critical issue. Addressing the causes of western discontent should not be seen as a bargaining chip that can be traded for western votes – "wooing" the West is the wrong path to take.

Increasing the West's role in national decisions should be about making Canadian democracy better and creating a system of policy development that fully accounts for western needs and perspectives rather than charming voters.

Getting Over the Hump of Inaction

Inaction is the dominant characteristic of the federal government's approach to fixing the problems that cause western discontent. Decades have gone by while westerners have put forward ideas and made calls for

change that have been ignored or stymied by federal government inaction. Typical excuses for this inaction include the charge that proposed changes are ideological preferences rather than true regional needs, that the calls for change are not specific enough, and that the proposals require changes to the Constitution that are extremely difficult to achieve.

> ***Process Over Policy***
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> *It is important to note that western Canadians are not just dissatisfied with particular federal policies; they are dissatisfied with how the country works – with the federation itself. Changes to the way the federal government is structured and to how it operates are needed. Policies come and go – what has stayed the same is the barriers to full western participation in the national government. For discontent to abate, westerners need a stronger voice in Ottawa over the long-term.*
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> *This is why the Canada West Foundation action plan does not focus on short-term policy shifts. These are important, but they are a separate issue. Improving the region's voice within the federal government will benefit all westerners, not just those who agree with a particular change in policy direction.*

To get over this hump, the Canada West Foundation has put together a non-ideological, concrete, and easy-to-do set of changes designed to get the ball rolling on addressing the structural and operational problems that stand at the root of western discontent. The proposals in our ten-point action plan do not require changes to the Constitution, do not require years of planning, and do not require huge sums of money (indeed, they are virtually cost-free). Nor do they require an ideological commitment to smaller government or the adoption of specific ideological perspectives on social issues. And they do not harm other parts of the country – they are a "win-win" rather than a zero-sum game. ***The only barrier to making these changes is political will.***

This is not to suggest that the ten points in the Canada West Foundation action plan are the only options. Indeed, one of the goals of the action plan was to stimulate debate about how to fix the problems that cause western discontent. This debate is crucial because it presents an opportunity to revisit old ideas, to generate new ones, and to keep the issue on the federal agenda. The action plan is not meant to close the dialogue on how to address the causes of western discontent, but to re-open it.

Notwithstanding the need for debate and for other ideas to be put forward, it is critical that change happen and that it happen *now*. Westerners are open to a range of solutions, but they are tired of waiting and the window of time in which to prevent further western disengagement is short. Westerners want action, not

words. Hence, the value of a practical, easy-to-do approach. As a consequence, the Canada West Foundation action plan can be characterized as a political soft ball. If the federal government will not make these basic changes and make them as soon as possible – if it fails to hit this soft ball out of the park – what *will* it do?

The action plan has, in fact, been criticized in the West for being too timid, for not going far enough, and for being too soft. This criticism highlights the fact that many westerners see the ten points as a bare minimum and not as too much to ask – they see them as small things that should have happened a long time ago. Given this, the action plan serves as a barometer of the federal government's commitment to real change. While carrying out the action plan will not end western discontent, it will be a clear step in the right direction and one that westerners need to see taken as soon as possible.

The 2004 Looking West Survey

The September 2003 ***West in Canada*** *report incorporated extensive public opinion data illustrating the scope and intensity of western discontent. In late March, 2004, CWF will release the first of two reports based on a detailed study of 3,200 western Canadian and 800 Ontario respondents conducted in early 2004. The first* ***Looking West 2004*** *report will explore opinions on federalism and democratic reform issues in the West and Ontario, while the second report (to be released in late spring) will explore the opinions of western Canadians on a broad range of public policy issues.*

The Canada West Foundation action plan is meant, therefore, to be a beginning, not an end. Carrying out the ten steps will build momentum toward more fundamental changes. The plan is also a challenge to federal politicians from all parties and regions (and to decision-makers within the federal civil service) to take a stand on this issue and fight – and fight hard – for greater western representation within the federal government.

Updating the Action Plan

Some positive movement has occurred since the release of the action plan and there are grounds for optimism that this will continue as Canadians gird themselves for a general election. However, there are also some areas in which little progress has been made, many where positive rhetoric has yet to be matched with action, and a few in which the polarity of change has been negative. So, although there is reason for optimism, the need to keep putting pressure on the federal government remains as great as ever.

Designed to help create just this sort of pressure, the original Canada West Foundation ten-point action plan focused on three interrelated themes: democratic reform, improved intergovernmental relations, and changes to the internal operations of the federal government. Interest in these themes, of course, is by no means restricted to the West; there is, for example, a broad national interest in democratic reform that sweeps across regional boundaries. At the same time, the themes play out differently in the West where they are thoroughly entangled with regional discontent.

If the federal government will not make these basic changes and make them as soon as possible – if it fails to hit this soft ball out of the park – what *will* it do?

Democratic Reform

Our recommendations in *The West in Canada* were not meant to provide the last word but, instead, a constructive starting point for a comprehensive *national* debate on democratic reform.

We advanced four specific recommendations to stimulate this debate:

- the redistribution of parliamentary seats to reflect the 2001 Census should take place before the next general election is held;
- party discipline within the House of Commons should be significantly reduced;
- appointments to the Senate should be made by the Prime Minister from lists submitted by provincial and territorial governments; and
- the Government of Canada should conduct a comprehensive review of non-constitutional options for Senate reform.

Progress has been made on only the first two recommendations. In the fall of 2003, Bill C-49 was introduced in the House to ensure that the electoral boundary changes stemming from the 2001 Census would be in place by April 1, 2004, thus clearing the decks for an anticipated spring election. Redistribution, which will add two seats each in British Columbia and Alberta and three in Ontario, is of particular salience in the high

Whipping the House Into Shape

A three-line whip is one way to formalize the reduction in party discipline. Bills would be identified at the outset of the legislative process as one-line bills (party discipline is encouraged but not required), two-line bills (party discipline is strongly encouraged but dissent is tolerated) or three-line bills, which would be treated as confidence measures. Only in the last case would defeat in the House lead to the resignation of the government. The Martin government appears to have endorsed the three-line whip procedure.

growth provinces of Alberta and British Columbia whose residents chafe at their under-representation in the current House.

Although the bill died when Parliament was prorogued, the Martin government has indicated that it is committed to ensuring the new seats are in place before calling an election, and Elections Canada is planning for an April 1 implementation date.

The fact that the Conservative leadership race will not conclude until mid-March all but guarantees that this first recommendation will be met.

There has been tentative progress with respect to the reduction of party discipline. It has long been argued that rigid party discipline in the House stifles regional representation and, therefore, undercuts the legitimacy of the House in some parts of the country. Under the rigid party discipline that has prevailed until now, Members of Parliament on the government side of the House cannot break ranks with their cabinet colleagues to voice the concerns of the regions they represent, and regional alliances of MPs that cross party lines are inconceivable. Parliament thus fails to reflect the complexity of regional interests and perspectives.

Rigid party discipline in the House of Commons stifles regional representation and, therefore, undercuts the legitimacy of the House in some parts of the country.

House of Commons reform has become the centerpiece of the Martin government's democratic reform agenda, with a reduction in party discipline identified as the primary means towards that end. It has been proposed that committees have greater autonomy and investigative capacity, and that fewer votes in the House be treated as confidence measures. The intent of these measures is to empower individual MPs and the committees on which they serve and to revitalize the House. If this goal is achieved and the stranglehold

of prime ministerial power over the House is broken, then a fundamental reform ambition of western Canadians, indeed all Canadians, will have been realized.

But will expectations be met? Will informal regional coalitions cross party lines? What proportion of bills will be treated as non-confidence measures? When push comes to shove, will the government tolerate legislative defeat? Will committees and their chairs be more independent? Will the commitment to reduce party discipline hold if the electoral landscape becomes more competitive? Will reduced party discipline become a durable convention in the House, one that reduces the concentration of power in the office of the prime minister over the long-term? In short, will the rhetoric be matched by real change?

While it may seem unduly negative to raise such questions, the commitment to reform has yet to be put to the test in the trench warfare of parliamentary politics. Whether Canadians will have sufficient opportunity to assess this commitment in the few months that Parliament is likely to be in session before an election is called is by no means clear. What is being pursued is nothing less than a transformation of the political culture in the House – a transformation that by its very nature will be neither quick nor certain.

The House of Commons, however, is only one half of the Canadian Parliament, and there is much less progress in sight with respect to the second chamber – the un-elected and ineffective Senate. In virtually all federal states apart from Canada, the second chamber provides for regional representation to complement and balance representation by population in the lower house. A well-functioning Senate would provide an effective voice for regional populations – *for citizens* – not for provincial *governments*, who already have a voice through a host of intergovernmental channels.

"Simply put, the Prime Minister should agree to accept advice from provincial governments on Senate appointments. The agreement would be informal, and would not require constitutional reform. ...[It] would at least reduce the patronage aspects of Senate appointments that makes the place such an object of public contempt."

John Ibbitson, *Globe and Mail*, December 22, 2003

Of perhaps even greater importance, an effective Senate would provide a check on the House, an opportunity for "sober second thought" that is badly needed in the Canadian system where so much power is concentrated in the hands of the prime minister and cabinet. Unfortunately, the existing Senate is an

embarrassing failure in both respects, a relic from the 19th century that is incompatible with democratic governance in the 21st.

How, then, can we begin to fashion a Senate that would strengthen rather than compromise democratic governance? *The West in Canada* recommends that Senate appointments be made by the prime minister from lists submitted by provincial and territorial governments. Such lists could be constructed through elections, through all-party resolutions in provincial legislatures, or through executive decisions.

This extremely modest step would be the start rather than the end of an evolutionary reform process, with more comprehensive reform following a period of democratic experimentation. Senate reform, we argued, is not only a hugely important symbolic issue in the West; it would have a real and immediate impact on the effectiveness of regional representation and is thus a key means of reducing regional discontent. It is also an inescapable component of a national democratic reform agenda.

Nevertheless, this recommendation has been explicitly rejected by the Martin government, which argues that it would only replace federal patronage with provincial patronage, although this would not happen if provincial governments were to follow the Alberta example and use elections to generate the list of provincial nominees. As Vancouver journalist Barbara Yaffe points out in the case of Alberta Senators-elect Bert Brown and Ted Morton, they "were elected by Alberta citizens, so how is that patronage of any sort?" (*Ottawa Citizen*, December 7, 2003).

"I very, very much support Senate reform and I'm not going to close my door on any way of getting there. But I do think you have to be quite skeptical about piecemeal steps. I don't want to see token reform."
Paul Martin, *Calgary Herald*, October 11, 2003

The argument has also been made that piecemeal reform should be rejected in favour of comprehensive and constitutionally entrenched reform. In practice, however, this means no reform whatsoever, and we reject the argument that if you can't do everything, you should do nothing.

Prime Minister Martin has urged the newly created Council of the Federation to tackle Senate reform, saying that he would be pleased to respond to any comprehensive proposal: "I'm in favour of Senate reform, but it's going to take provincial agreement ... let's see if [the provinces] can come to an agreement" (*Calgary Herald*,

December 19, 2003). However, this is likely to be seen by the premiers as a poisoned chalice for their new Council rather than as a serious attempt to get Senate reform underway. It is, in fact, one of the best ways to ensure that nothing happens, and no other action on the Senate reform front, constitutional or non-constitutional, has been proposed.

"If [Paul Martin] wanted a new beginning, he would bite the bullet and move to create an elected and empowered Senate. He would fashion for Canada a 'new democracy' ... Senate reform is too difficult, say the hesitators. But strong leadership is exactly about taking on challenges deemed to be too difficult. With the political capital Paul Martin has amassed he can find a way to bring Alberta and Quebec together on a Senate-amending formula."

Lawrence Martin, *Globe and Mail*, January 8, 2004

To this point, therefore, the federal government is putting all of its democratic reform eggs in the single basket of House of Commons reform. This is a safe strategy that will not satisfy western Canadian calls for fundamental reform of both the House and the Senate. Changes to the internal operations of the House will have limited public profile as few Canadians pay much attention to the inner workings of parliamentary committees. Nor is it clear that the proposed reforms will reduce the deep partisan divisions that currently constrain regional representation. And, to the extent that reform does take hold, it will become even more incongruous to have an appointed Senate that can block the House on a whim.

In short, while the incumbent government's reform agenda is to be applauded as far as it goes, it does not go anywhere near far enough to address either regional discontent or the more general Canadian thirst for democratic reform. It is impossible to escape the conclusion that Senate reform is an essential part of the democratic reform agenda.

Intergovernmental Relations

The West in Canada includes three recommendations for improving intergovernmental relations:

- the proposed Council of the Federation should be positively engaged by the Government of Canada;
- there should be an annual First Ministers' Conference, structured to provide a substantial measure of provincial and territorial input into the agenda and format; and
- institutional structures should be put into place to ensure effective provincial input into international trade agreements and policies that affect the western Canadian economy.

Traditionally, improved intergovernmentalism has seldom been advanced as a solution to western discontent; the focus has been more on parliamentary reform. At present, however, western Canadians see provincial governments as their primary voice when it comes to national policy. Although this might not be the case in the event of fundamental House of Commons and Senate reform, it is the current reality. Improving intergovernmental relations could thus potentially strengthen regional voices in national policymaking, thereby helping to address regional discontent.

Increased provincial government input into national decisions is not, however, a substitute for reforms that strengthen the voice of western Canadians *within* Parliament and the federal bureaucracy. Contrary to remarks made by Manitoba Premier Gary Doer that the Council of the Federation could do the work assigned to the Senate in 1867, the Council is not an alternative to the Senate, but a valuable complement to it. A strong and healthy federation needs *both* strong regional representation within the federal government and strong intergovernmental mechanisms.

The prospects for improved intergovernmental relations appear promising. The Council of the Federation, which brings together the provincial and territorial governments in a loosely organized intergovernmental coalition, has been established and appears to be finding a receptive audience within the current federal government. The new prime minister is on record as seeking to improve intergovernmental relations, and has committed to regular meetings with provincial premiers.

There is, however, no formal institutional structure proposed or in place to ensure effective provincial input into international trade agreements and policies that affect the western Canadian economy. The regional effects of international trade issues are significant and call for replacement of the existing ad hoc forms of regional input with formal mechanisms that can respond to issues as they arise and ensure that western Canadian concerns are understood and acted upon.

"By formally recognizing the new Council of the Federation and making clear his intention to work with it, Mr. Martin would in effect legitimize the idea that Canada is composed of 13 equal provincial and territorial jurisdictions. The idea that a province like Manitoba would have equivalent political weight to Ontario represents a massive paradigm shift in Canadian politics; one which the West has been demanding for decades. If taken seriously by Ottawa, the Council of the Federation would be an effective tool to promote the needs of western Canadians. This is the single most significant tip of the Stetson that Mr. Martin can give to the West."

Duane Nicol, *Winnipeg Free Press*, December 14, 2003

More uncertain is the extent to which improved intergovernmental relations will reduce regional discontent in the short-term, and in visible ways. It is not clear whether most western Canadians, or for that matter most Canadians, see more intergovernmentalism as the cure or as part of the problem. (The earlier creation of the Social Union Framework Agreement had no perceptible effect on the general public.)

Thus while improved intergovernmental relations should help address regional discontent, the effects may be at the margins, influencing the behaviour of provincial governments more than the attitudes of their electorates. Whether changes in the tone of intergovernmental relations will ripple down to the electorate remains to be seen. Despite this, if smoother and more formal provincial input into national decisions is achieved, and if it improves the regional performance of the federal government, improved intergovernmental relations is a worthwhile goal even if its visible effects on western discontent are limited.

Internal Operations of the Federal Government

The West in Canada includes three recommendations for the internal operations of the Government of Canada:

- a review should be conducted of the regional composition of central agencies within the federal government;
- the Government of Canada should conduct an audit of the regional distribution of program expenditures; and
- the Government of Canada should strengthen its policy capacity with respect to the regional application of national policies.

Given the very recent transition in the federal government, this is a difficult time to assess whether progress has been made with respect to the composition of central agencies; the focus to date has been on political appointments rather than on bureaucratic reform.

There is little dispute that western Canadians view the promotion of western MPs such as Ralph Goodale and Anne McLellan as a signal that Prime Minister Martin is interested in building a better relationship with western Canadians. (No minister, however, has been explicitly charged with the western discontent file.) However, while having western Canadians in senior cabinet positions is a good thing, it stops short of real reform. It is a form of representation that is too dependent on the whim of the prime minister and on the vagaries of election outcomes.

What also remains to be seen is whether temporary cabinet strength will be matched by long-term structural changes to the federal bureaucracy. The recruitment of western Canadians into the public service and their placement in key positions remains a challenge; the barriers posed by bilingualism, distance, and by regional discontent itself have not been breached, and plans to do so are at best embryonic. New Treasury Board policies that restrict most senior public service positions to those already fluent in both official languages, policies endorsed by Prime Minister Martin, constitute a particularly difficult barrier.

Here we should note that the issue is not simply one of counting heads, something that can be difficult to do in any event. (Is someone from Saskatchewan if he or she were born there? Educated in the province?

Lived there for an appreciable length of time? Any of the above? All of the above?) The federal government must find a way to deploy western Canadians in a way that brings regional insights into play throughout the federal bureaucracy.

"[There is a need for a larger western presence in the federal public service] so that when there's a Western message, it's not only heard, but understood by people who not only come from there, but appreciate the region in a very personal way."

Ralph Goodale, *The Regina Leader-Post*, September 4, 2003

The Canada West Foundation's proposed audit of program expenditures reflects a pervasive belief in the West that federal expenditures are not equitably distributed. To remedy this, we recommended a review of past expenditures in order to document the reality of western grievances. In retrospect, this recommendation emphasized the past too much. The government's past conduct (where there is little doubt as to the validity of western discontent) is less critical than what the federal government does in the future.

Therefore in the months ahead, the Canada West Foundation is calling for a thorough regional analysis of new program initiatives. For example, if Ottawa moves to address the emerging urban agenda, will federal initiatives recognize the urban face of western Canada and the unique challenges faced by the region's metropolitan centres? Across all policy areas, the government's commitment to program review should incorporate measures of the regional effects of federal programming. A program review that neglects the regional distribution and effects of federal expenditures will be woefully inadequate.

What can be said about the policy capacity of the federal government with respect to the regional application of national policies, about the capacity for program design that takes into account regional differences and aspirations? In this regard, *The West in Canada* called for the federal government to strengthen its policy capacity with respect to the regional application of national policies. As part of the new cabinet structure introduced in December 2003, Western Economic Diversification was elevated from an agency falling under the umbrella of Industry Canada to a full-fledged ministry. This is a promising development, although it is yet to be seen whether it will be matched with the necessary financial resources and cross-ministry influence. It is too early to determine if policy capacity will be significantly enhanced, or if departments and central agencies will have the human resources in place to understand and accommodate regional interests, perspectives and aspirations.

To date, then, halting progress has been made in some areas of the Canada West Foundation action plan. A particularly disappointing area of intransigence has been Senate reform. It is also important to stress that "listening to the West" and "respecting the West" provide only a start. Neither is a substitute for effective regional representation within Parliament and the federal bureaucracy, although both may well be preconditions. Listening to the West – to 30 per cent of the national population – should not be optional or based on the whim of the prime minister.

The Canada West Foundation Action Plan - Action to Date

ORIGINAL RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE GOVERNMENT OF CANADA	*ACTION TO DATE*
1. Party discipline within the House of Commons should be significantly reduced.	**Positive rhetoric**
2. The redistribution of parliamentary seats to reflect the 2001 Census should take place before the next general election is held.	**Commitment in place**
3. The proposed Council of the Federation should be positively engaged by the Government of Canada.	**Positive rhetoric**
4. There should be an annual First Ministers' Conference, structured to provide a substantive measure of provincial and territorial input into the agenda and format.	**Commitment to regular meetings in place**
5. Institutional structures should be put into place to ensure effective provincial input into international trade agreements and policies that affect the western Canadian economy.	**No action**
6. A review should be conducted of the regional composition of central agencies within the federal government.	**No action**
7. The Government of Canada should conduct an audit of the regional distribution of program expenditures.	**No action**
8. Appointments to the Senate of Canada should be made by the prime minister from lists submitted by provincial and territorial governments.	**Negative rhetoric**
9. The Government of Canada should conduct a comprehensive review of non-constitutional options for Senate reform.	**No action/downloaded to provinces**
10. The Government of Canada should strengthen its policy capacity with respect to the regional application of national policies.	**No action**

A Catalyst for Informed Debate

The success of any catalyst can be judged by the reaction it creates. In this respect, reactions across the board endorsed the Canada West Foundation's identification of the problem. Where disagreement arose was with potential solutions. Thus the great bulk of the commentary around *The West in Canada* dealt with alternative or complementary strategies for addressing regional discontent.

Electoral Reform

Many commentators argued that Canada West Foundation's democratic reform agenda was framed too narrowly. In particular, it failed to encompass electoral reform. Some form of proportionate representation is under discussion in New Brunswick, Ontario, Prince Edward Island and Quebec, a citizen's assembly on electoral reform is well underway in British Columbia, and the notion has been endorsed by the NDP and elements within the new Conservative Party. Support for proportional representation has been explicitly linked to the problem of western Canadian discontent. Note, for example, comments by Janice MacKinnon, former Saskatchewan NDP Minister of Finance: "The most fundamental cause of western discontent is the first-past-the-post electoral system. The system gives an electoral advantage to small parties with regionally concentrated appeal, and fails to ensure that the views of all regions are adequately represented in the central government. ... The main argument against alternatives like proportional representation is that majority governments would be the exception; governments in general would be coalitions. Rather than being a problem, this would be an asset in such a regionalized country as Canada" (*Inroads*, Winter/Spring 2004).

"The current voting system feeds regional alienation. Replacing it should be a top priority of democratic reform. Without it, the effect of parliamentary reform will be limited, at best. ...voters in all parts of the country would benefit by adopting a voting system which gave the same weight to every vote. Such a system would tear down the regional electoral fortresses that some parties enjoy by recognizing instead whatever strength each party holds across the country."

Doug Bailie, *Edmonton Journal*, September 7, 2003

Fixed Election Dates

British Columbia not only leads the national debate on electoral reform; it is also the first provincial government to institute fixed election dates. This innovation has been picked up on in commentaries on

regional discontent. For example, Vancouver columnist Barbara Yaffe suggested that "[a]nother way Mr. Martin could send out an early sign of seriousness about addressing western discontent is to follow a B.C. electoral innovation that has been widely lauded in this region: B.C. Premier Gordon Campbell has made it mandatory for B.C. to have a fixed election day every four years" (*Ottawa Citizen*, December 7, 2003). In the same column, Yaffe cites Stephen Harper calling upon Mr. Martin to make the 2000 election "the last one to ... have been called out of crass partisan convenience."

Decentralization

For those pessimistic about creating a stronger western Canadian voice in Ottawa, reducing the power of the national government is an appealing alternative. This is the case articulated in the Alberta "firewall" proposal, which would have the provincial government collect its own personal income tax, withdraw from the Canada Health Act, establish a provincial police force, and establish an Alberta pension plan to replace the Canadian Pension Plan. In these ways, Alberta could insulate itself from federal policies. In the words of Link Byfield, chairman of the Citizens Centre for Freedom and Democracy, "if we can't influence Ottawa, then we must decrease Ottawa's influence in the West" (*The Ottawa Citizen*, August 2, 2003).

"Ottawa makes decisions ostensibly in aid of the national interest, but which end up favouring certain regions at the expense of others. Most often, it's the interests of voter-rich Central Canada that prevail. ...we think Western discontent will only subside when Ottawa makes more effort to stay on its side of the jurisdictional line."

Calgary Herald, September 3, 2003

A Western PCO and/or PMO

There has been some discussion about the creation of a western secretariat within the Privy Council Office and perhaps even a western Prime Minister's Office to strengthen connections between the federal government and western Canadians.

A Second Western Economic Opportunities Conference

In October 2003 a conference organized by the Canada West Foundation was held in Calgary to mark the 30th anniversary of the 1973 Western Economic Opportunities Conference that brought together Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau and the four western premiers. A summary of the anniversary event prepared by the Canada West Foundation* recommends that the WEOC format be repeated in the wake of the anticipated

* Copies of the report, *Ottawa and the West: Reflections on the Western Economic Opportunities Conference of 1973*, are available for download from the Canada West Foundation website (www.cwf.ca).

2004 general election, and that a similar format be adopted for both the Atlantic provinces and the northern territories. The goal this time around would not be a national policy for the West but rather the discussion of how best to ensure that western interests and aspirations are reflected in national economic policies.

"The West and B.C. just want, and need, good government. That means: parliamentary reform to empower the private MP; electoral reform to empower the voter; Senate reform to empower the regions; property rights in the Charter; Supreme Court judges vetted by the provinces and Parliament; the 'notwithstanding' threshold raised to 60 per cent (so it can actually be used); and a truly muscular freedom-of-information law that expands coverage to all federal bodies of every kind and dramatically reduces exemptions. That's all."

Gordon Gibson, *Winnipeg Free Press*, December 14, 2003

Policy Change

The Canada West Foundation action plan is based on the premise that western discontent can only be fully addressed through structural changes to the nature of the federation. The action plan's recommendations are designed to improve the fairness and efficiency of the federation as a whole and ensure that federal policies take into account the needs and aspirations of regional communities. The action plan also stayed away from policy recommendations and focused on structural change because the West, like other regions, is far from homogeneous when it comes to policy prescriptions or ideological dispositions. We recognize, however, that policy change is also part of the equation and many commentators have chosen to focus on this aspect of the debate.

"The first thing you need to do [as prime minister] is that you make it very clear that you're prepared to listen and respect the views of the West, and that the policy that says a national issue is something that arises in the East and a regional issue is something that arises in the West is going to be changed. The fact is that a regional issue arising in the West is a national issue and it has to be treated as such."

Paul Martin, *Winnipeg Free Press*, November 9, 2003

Ideological Change

CWF is a nonpartisan organization, and thus the action plan's recommendations do not push for changes to the partisan landscape either in the West or in the country as a whole; we argue that addressing western discontent should be a priority for *all* parties. However, ten years of inaction on the part of the Chrétien government and strong support for first the Reform and then the Alliance Party in the West have led many to conclude that the best way to reduce western discontent is to defeat the Liberal Party at the polls. Note, for example, the following editorial comment in the *Edmonton Sun:* "The new report from the Canada West Foundation addressing western alienation is a disappointing document that misses the obvious way to address western discontent, and that's to replace our arrogant Liberal government" (September 7, 2003).

> "[Canada is] an undemocratic country run by people who think it works just fine the way it is and who have no interest in sharing power with the West."
>
> Link Byfield, *Calgary Herald*, September 5, 2003

It is up to western voters to decide which candidates and which parties they think will make the changes needed to improve the West's voice in Ottawa and reduce western discontent. Regardless of which party forms the next government, our argument stands: make the basic changes outlined in the Canada West Foundation action plan and use this as a basis for more fundamental reform across a broad range of areas. It is the government-of-the-day's job to make these changes and the opposition-of-the-day's job to keep the pressure on and hold the government accountable for what it does and does not do in this and other areas.

Triple-E Senate

There was criticism that *The West in Canada* did not go far enough on the Senate issue. For example, Stephen Harper, then leader of the Canadian Alliance, criticized the report for failing to push for a Triple-E Senate (effective, elected and equal): "That to me is a major omission. We don't think people in the West will stand for anything less than that. I still believe that's what people in the West are looking for. Without that, I don't think you're going to get many of the other recommendations" (*Calgary Herald*, September 3, 2003). In a similar vein, Alberta Senator Doug Roche stated that the recommendations would not lead to meaningful Senate reform "because true reform can be achieved only by opening up the Constitution to correct regional imbalances" (*Edmonton Journal*, September 4, 2003). We stopped short of recommending a complete Senate reform package on the grounds that starting small was better than getting stuck in the mud of constitutional change. For many, however, this strategy was too timid.

As the above points illustrate, there is no shortage of ideas for addressing discontent with the federal government in western Canada. Indeed, as noted earlier, the Canada West Foundation action plan, with its focus on short-term achievable steps, is perhaps the most moderate position in the public debate in the West. If the federal government is unwilling to take these modest steps, it can expect westerners to lose what is left of their confidence in the federal government.

Looking Ahead

As we approach the 2004 general election it is important to stress that western voters will be wooed or repelled in large part as *Canadian* voters, and thus by party positions on such issues as the new urban agenda, Canada-US relations, responsible fiscal management, and national defence. Of particular importance will be the approach taken by parties and leaders to a national democratic reform agenda. The issues that will play out across other regions of the country will also play out across the West, and thus successfully "wooing the West" may be as much about good government as it is about consideration for specific western interests or policy perspectives. At the same time, however, the positions taken by candidates and parties towards the place of the West in Canada will undoubtedly play a role. The task at hand is to make addressing the causes of western discontent a priority item on the federal agenda.

With this in mind, there are a number of questions that western Canadians should pose to *all* candidates and parties during the coming election campaign:

- What specific policy changes would you implement to promote the recruitment of western Canadians into the federal public service?
- What changes would you recommend to ensure that regional perspectives are heard and respected within the public service?
- What would you do to reform the Senate? If nothing, why?
- Would you and your party support a national enquiry into electoral reform that would consider alternatives to the current single-member, first-past-the-post electoral system? If not, why?

- Would you support holding an annual First Ministers' Conference? If not, why?
- Would you support holding a second Western Economic Opportunities Conference, with similar conferences to be held in the northern territories and Atlantic provinces? If not, why?
- Would you support a fixed term for the House of Commons, analogous to that recently adopted for the BC legislature? If not, why?
- What would you recommend to ensure effective provincial input into international trade treaties and policies?
- What policies would you recommend to ensure regional balance in the composition of central agencies in the federal government?
- Would you support the creation of a central audit capacity in the federal government to address regional equity and the regional effects of national programming? If not, why?

"At the end of my mandate, if westerners feel they are part of the national decision-making, if the feeling of westerners is that they have been listened to, but more importantly that they have been major players in the debate, then I think I will have succeeded."

Paul Martin, *Winnipeg Free Press*, November 9, 2003

The publication of *The West in Canada* in September was designed to start, not end, a national debate about the place of the West in the Canadian federation. The forthcoming general election should also be seen as an opportunity to move forward, but again not as an end of the debate on the place of the West. It is an opportunity for parties and their leaders, and for Canadians both inside and outside the West, to articulate an enduring response to the chronic problem of western discontent.

It is important to note that addressing western discontent does not negate the need to address concerns expressed by other regions (nor does it deny the fact that there is work to be done on democratic reform within provinces as well as at the federal level). Ontario, Quebec, Atlantic Canada, and the North all have

unique characteristics and issues that need to be voiced within, and addressed by, the federal government. Indeed, the democratic reform options popular in the West and recommended in the Canada West Foundation action plan would help all regions express their unique perspectives at the federal level and, by so doing, help reduce regional discontent in not just the West but across Canada as well.

The next few months and the forthcoming election campaign present a critically important opportunity to address the chronic condition of regional discontent in western Canada. If federal politicians miss this opportunity, then the dead weight of discontent will continue to impede effective public policy and erode ties between western Canadians and the federal government. We will pay not only a regional but a national cost, for if 30 per cent of the national community continues to experience frustration and discontent, a national cost cannot be avoided. If, on the other hand, the opportunity is seized, we can strengthen not only the place of the West in Canada but Canada itself. Indeed, the goal is a stronger West within a stronger Canada. By addressing chronic regional discontent, Canadians have the opportunity to modernize their political system and thus better prepare us all for the challenges of the 21st century.

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